Students’ Expectations About Their Grades vs. Course Expectations From Them: Will the Mismatch Ensure Quality Education?

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ABSTRACT

The paper presents a research study on the reasons for mismatch between students’ grade expectations and the actual grades they were awarded in the “Ethics” course at an engineering education institution in India. The paper also outlines how this event created the social and political stigmas among the authorities to opt for the re-evaluation of students’ answer sheets. After receiving the re-evaluated grade sheet from the re-evaluator, some meager and minor discrepancies were noticed which were liable to question, suspicion, and hence not impeccable. But by overlooking the reasons for trifling discrepancies authorities considered the re-evaluated grade sheet as the final one. In this context, the study examined the reliability and viability of criteria-based grading against norm-based grading model with the plausible impacts of authoritarian intervention in distorting the course instructor’s grade sheet, and its implications on quality retention in higher education.

Keywords: Course Objectives, Criterion-Based Grading, Curved Grading, Norm-Based Grading, Quality Retention

INTRODUCTION

Though there are many interpretations found in reference to assessment and grading, but in this paper we delimit their scopes to our contexts and interpret respectively as:

- **Assessment:** It refers to judging students’ assignment performance by awarding score/mark about the quality and extent of their achievement in a particular course. Assignments may be asked in the form of term papers, quizzes, field visit reports, etc.;
- **Grade:** It signifies a letter grade. The letter grades are arranged from higher to lower as S, A, B, C, D, E, U. Here S becomes the top (highest) grade, U as fail grade, and E as the lowest pass grade in a course. Assignments’ scores or marks serve as the raw materials for grade determinations when they are

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aggregated and the result converted into a symbolic representation of overall achievement. It refers to the classification of the level of students’ performance in a course.

If grades won’t be used in the instructional process, even then teacher can teach and students can learn in all educational settings. But thinking of approval of academic bodies for an educational programme that consists of a few courses without incorporating assessment and evaluation practices, and thereby grading is something unusual. Grading can’t just be a customary practice in any educational context because grades are the basic currencies of our educational system, and results in both immediate benefits (e.g., enhance motivation, approval of family) and long-term consequences (e.g., admission to higher educational institutions, preferred employment) to the students (Tata, 1999). It is available in different forms such as, letter grade, point grade, etc. On the account of Frisbie and Waltman (1992) grades provide information to students for self-evaluation, analysis of strengths and weaknesses, and creating a general impression of academic promise.

In higher educational setup, students’ satisfaction about their grades is one among the other important considerations because grades received by them are invariably related to their perceptions, attitude, and behavior towards the course. Students who received their expected grades always project their views positively about the courses, whereas negative connotations were attributed by those who abstained from their expected grades (Chacko, 1983; Marlin & Gaynor, 1989; Perkins, Guerin, & Scileii, 1990; Snyder & Clair, 1976). Wentzien (2011) after comparing the students’ expected grades and the actual grades they had received at the end of a course, found that those who had passed the course correctly perceived their grades as genuine whereas students who had failed overestimated their grades. Eason et al. (2009) reported that students who received the higher grades seem capable of approximately set the class average. Of those expected grades nearer to the class average, some of them failed and thus they had strong objections to the grading pattern, because on the one hand, they had overestimated their grades by failing to specify the approximate class average and on the other hand, they did not meet the course objectives as course demands from them. Again, the same study conveyed that students failed to anticipate their actual grades in a course even after the syllabus was communicated to them incorporating the methods of assessment, evaluation criteria, grading model at the beginning of a course. Students received grades that are lower than their expectation are more likely to perceive the grade distribution as unfair. In this regard, Murstein (1965) submitted that better students are fairly calculating their expected grades, but poor students are less accurate and most often indicated that they deserve a higher grade, above the class average.

According to Eason et al. (2009) students are often disappointed and upset with their final course grades. Some of the angst may be due to the disagreement as to what is important or appropriate in evaluating student performance. The possible differences between faculty and students may explain much of the dissatisfaction students express when they receive lower grades than they had expected. Shefrin (2007) reported that students have the cognitive biases in their formation of grade expectations and understanding of why they earn the grades as they expected. Chan et al (2005) noted that poor-performing students miscalculate, misgauge, and misread their own performance although various cues might available to them. Students were also not accepting a “strict grade curve” in the grade distribution (Eason et al., 2009). This study reported that students received poor grades because of their low capability to fulfill the course objectives and not putting the required efforts as desired by the course. According to Norvilitis and Zhang (2009) students are likely evaluating their examination scores relating to the performance of the whole class and ignor-
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